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THE ANTIDOTE

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GUY HORBURY was thirty-three, big and clumsily made, but he moved easily and was light on his feet—like an elephant stuffed with feathers. A good face, keen blue eyes, a deferential, sympathetic manner and low, deep voice that suggested an ability, regretfully repressed, to make love: all this made him attractive to the other sex. In 1916 he returned from the Western front, knocked about but not disfigured. Ever since, he had been stuck in a byway of the War Office.

He had a charming little house and garden on Campden Hill, a cook-house-keeper who was a genius, and a discharged soldier who was a treasure. Occasionally he thought of marriage; but, after all, there was a good deal to be said for a fire-side, a lamp, and an evening paper to himself.

Last winter, through the death of a distant cousin, he became Sir Guy Horbury: not much money, a thousand or two a year perhaps, but still, there it was. . . . So he went to see his Aunt Cecilia, an elderly spinster, living alone, in Hyde Park Place.

She was presiding at a comfy-looking tea-table when he arrived. "My dear Guy," she said, "I was just talking about you. I'm delighted to think you've got it." She meant the title and the rest, of course. "Poor dear Henry didn't enjoy life." Henry was the unlamented cousin. "It was so wise of him not to go on with it. . . . Do you know Mrs. Thornton?"

He had seen her the moment he en-

tered and said to himself, "Oh, I say," for the little black figure seated on the sofa was charming to look at—eyes as blue as his own, but with an appealing expression in them, or a bewildered one when it occurred to her to turn it on, and a delightful smile. She looked very young, and she was dressed in deepest mourning.

"She's a little war widow," Aunt Cecilia said tenderly; "you'll feel for her, for you might have been one yourself a year or two ago. I mean you might have made one if you'd been married."

Then tea amenities occupied her till she saw her visitors exchanging glances. "If he is very good you'll sing him a song before you go, won't you, Esme, darling?" she asked.

"Oh—shall I?" The voice was soft and caressing.

He felt rather badly for a moment—pleasantly badly.

"He was a hero in the war, just as your poor Leonard was," Aunt Cecilia went on. "But I told you all about him just now." It rather pleased him to find that he had been explained. She proceeded to explain Esme darling to him. "This poor child," she said, "worked at a hospital till her husband was killed; now her mother lives with her, but they are not well off—no one is with all the dreadful taxes—so she wants to give lessons in singing. She is going to see the Gordon-Days, who live three doors off, at five o'clock. They have two girls, dear, good, plain creatures, who think they have voices."

II

"I ONLY sing foolish little English songs," Mrs. Thornton said, while her pretty fingers wandered about on the keys.

"I love—them." She looked up at him in the middle of the sentence, which was why he hesitated.

Her voice was sweet and true and her articulation perfect. She put pathetic meaning into every word of "When the thorn is white with blossom." . . . Then it was time to go.

"One more; the Gordon-Days are only three doors off," he pleaded. "It won't take you a minute to get there."

But Esme darling shook her head.

"She and her mother live in a little flat in Hyde Park Mansions by the Edge-ware Road. I am afraid they are very poor," Aunt Cecilia told him when she had gone.

"What was her husband like?"

"Oh, a dear fellow; but I think he kept her in order." Aunt Cecilia smiled all over her face, and a dimple, that had come along the years from her youth, showed itself. "She's such a helpless little thing and so pretty—I hope she'll marry again, poor child." Then, hastily, "She wouldn't do for you, dear Guy, you would be much too easy. . . . Now tell me about yourself. I'm so glad you came to-day, for to-morrow I'm going to Droitwich for two months."

Two months! It instantly occurred to him that he wouldn't see Mrs. Thornton's blue eyes again. . . . He looked at the clock. Half past five. She had had time enough to discuss those lessons. . . .

He saw her leave the Gordon-Day house just ahead of him, and went toward her. "Do let me tell you how awfully I enjoyed that song," he said in his most deferential tone.

"Did you?" Her manner was dejected.

"I hope it was a successful visit?"

"I'm afraid not; they want someone from the College of Music. I'm only just, well—you know—"

"Oh, I say, how stupid of them." He hesitated. "There are some friends of mine who might be useful—and—may I walk on a little way with you?"

She nodded. They went on together.

He wished she were not quite so much like a little walking funeral. Her long veil waggled to and fro—he could see it out of the tail of his eye; people looked at them as they passed, as if they thought—but it didn't matter.

"Do tell me about the friends," she said. He thought her voice adorable.

"They have daughters and that sort of thing, you know." This was all pure lying. "They live in—Hampstead," he added desperately. "I'll write to them to-night. . . . I say, if I might venture, it's frightfully rude of me, when we have only just met, but if I were you," he thought it kind to give her a hint, "I'd take off some of that mourning when you go to see about pupils—it puts people in low spirits at this time—such a lot of worry about, you know—I hope you don't mind?"

"Of course I don't," she said gratefully. He thought it so nice of her. This was when they were on her door-step.

"I'll remember the address—and—write." With evident regret he was about to go.

"Come in," she said with a smile that made his head whirl. "Mother would love to thank you. You are so kind."

"Oh, but perhaps she wouldn't like to—be bothered with a caller?"

"She would," in a low tone; "I know she would."

The flat was on the ground floor. He followed her into a pleasant sitting-room that showed some knowledge of the prevailing fashion in furniture—and suggested scanty expenditure. There was a fire, with a low fender stool before it. He felt that it was her favorite seat.

"This is where we live," she said.

"Awfully nice—just you and your mother, eh?"

"Just us two," she gave a soft little laugh—her spirits were evidently going up. "We are very cosy—only"—as if she had suddenly remembered her rôle—"I am often dreadfully unhappy. You see it's all so difficult." She pulled in her underlip.

He longed to kiss her, but, of course, he made no sign. "Is the mother out?" he asked.

"I don't think so—I'll go and see."

When she had gone he looked at the

songs on the piano and the books on the shelves. The books were all novels; some of them made him grunt a little. "She oughtn't to read this sort of stuff," he thought, "but probably they were Thornton's."

"Mother is lying down," she said when she came back. "She had a headache."

He turned as if to go. "Perhaps you'll let me in another day, or," as he saw a look of regret on her face, "mayn't I stay and talk to you now for a little while?"

"Yes, do—this room is so untidy—and those poor flowers—we have had them a week." She tried to rearrange them. He knew, though her back was turned, that she stooped and kissed them. He almost loved her for it. "They are dying," she said with a sigh. She shook up the two rather meagre sofa cushions and collected the songs on the piano and smiled at him and sat down on the low fender seat.

"I say," he asked gently in a low, sympathetic tone, "is it long since—?"

"Nearly a year."

"Poor little girl." He ventured to touch her hand: she didn't mind.

Then the mother entered. She was a good deal like her daughter, with the same rather underbred manner and prettiness. In five minutes he was talking with them as if he had known them five months at least. This had been Leonard Thornton's flat, he learned. They would have to give it up shortly and go to an aunt in the Regent's Park Road. It was wonderful how aunts were sprinkled all over the country, he thought, and always used for emergencies.

Before he went away he had suggested taking them to hear a well-known singer at the Albert Hall next Sunday afternoon.

"I'm afraid I couldn't go," the mother said, "but Esme would like it," and he understood that he might take her alone.

He felt that he was in luck.

"Isn't he a darling!" Esme said when he had gone; "and Sir Guy Horbury—Sir Guy—" She stood on tiptoe on the fender stool and looked at herself in the glass over the mantelpiece. It was hung inconveniently high so that it might hide a dark patch on the wall.

"You ought to marry him."

"Perhaps he doesn't want to marry any one."

"Oh, nonsense. A man wants to do anything, if a woman knows how to make him. You didn't care much for Leonard."

III

They went to the concert on Sunday. Esme wore a soft gray coat and skirt and a gray fur toque. She looked charming; he saw it, felt it.

"I hardly knew you," he said in the taxi. He had seen her twice since the other day and taken her flowers and books; they were almost old friends. "I'm so glad you've left off those ghastly black things."

"I liked them."

"Liked them?"

"I thought they were so becoming."

He looked at her uneasily. "Oh, no," he said quickly. "Think what they meant."

"I didn't think," she answered innocently. "I just wore them."

"Oh, I see—" He was rather puzzled.

"But I am so glad to have left them off." She turned her face toward him. He could have sworn there was tenderness in her blue eyes; so he took her hand.

The music had its effect on them both, or, at any rate, on him. . . . They walked back across the park in the twilight. And then they had tea at the flat with her mother, and Esme sang to him—in a very low voice, because it was Sunday, she said—little old French songs and very old English ones. Her perfect articulation sent every sentimental word into his heart. He could hardly tear himself away. He rather hoped they would ask him to dinner, but they didn't . . . for, as a matter of fact, they didn't have any—only a little scrambled meal, quite unfit to set before a well-off young man.

So he went back to Campden Hill and sat by the fireside and forgot to read *The Observer* and wondered. . . . She was a dear little thing. . . . It would be awful for her to live with her mother and aunt. It couldn't be done. . . . And as for teaching—he hadn't much confidence in her capacity. . . . He didn't feel that she had cared very much for her Leonard.

She was certain to marry again; but he didn't think there was any one in the way. He realized with a start that he couldn't bear the thought of any one else snapping her up. "Jolliest little girl in the world," he said to himself. "By Jove, I could eat her."

So things went on.

He saw her nearly every day for a fortnight. He contrived to send the mother presents—game and fruit; flowers and chocolates to Esme. He developed a taste for the National Gallery and took her there, but it wasn't a success. She knew nothing about pictures. She liked matinees and tea shops . . . oh, yes, she liked cakes.

Then matters were suddenly hurried up. Some one made an offer for the flat and Esme and her mother were to migrate to the aunt in the Regent's Park. She told him about it one afternoon while she sat at his feet on the fender stool—just as usual. Her mother had a headache—just as usual.

"I can't bear it," she said. "It's a horrid little house. The black beetles come up-stairs in the night, and you can hear the animals in the Zoological Gardens—lions and tigers roaring and growling when it's dark." She shuddered and opened her eyes very wide and looked frightened. "And Aunt Lilian is deaf and so domineering. I can't bear to think of it." She ate a chocolate from a box on the floor beside her, turned to the fire, and considered for a minute. He couldn't talk sentiment, but he was very much in love.

"Look here," he said, "don't bear it. Marry me instead. I have a jolly little house and we'd have no end of sport." He pulled her up from the stool.

"Oh, I couldn't." But she let his arms go round her.

"Yes, you could, you know, if you tried. Don't you think you could manage to—well, care for me a bit?"

"I do," she said, "frightfully—dreadfully," and burst into tears. It fetched him more than anything else could have done.

"You little darling, you little angel—and everything else that is stunning. We'll be married right off." He had never felt so happy in his life.

"I shouldn't have any clothes."

"We'll go to Paris afterwards and you shall have a heap—I'll get passports, you bet." She laughed—she had a dear little chuckling laugh.

"Last night I was making my veil—do you remember it?"

"Rather." He remembered how it had waggled.

"I was making it into a little dinner blouse and trimming it with gold, in case we dined at the Ritz again."

Rather a rum thing to make a widow's veil for one man into something to go out larking with another, he thought. But, of course, she was such an innocent little thing—and—well, she just lived. By Jove, she should live, too, and be happy in the future.

"I'll go about a license to-morrow," he said when he was leaving her; "we'll be married at once. You shan't interview the black beetles or go within hail of the tigers."

He put her pretty head on his shoulder and her arm round his neck. . . .

The Regent's Park aunt was expected, so he hurried away, and he was the happiest man in the world that evening. He sat and thought how lovely it would be in Paris; it was very full, but they would get in somewhere. And now the war was over there would be heaps of things in the shops. It would be splendid fun to give her pretty frocks. He imagined her laughter and her eyes with the appealing look in them when she wanted something extra-expensive . . . he thought of her lips and her kisses. . . .

IV

It was rather cruel—the very next morning soon after ten he had a telegram: "Come immediately, something dreadful. Esme."

"Good Lord!" He bolted out, looking for a taxi. He was nearly distracted before he found one, but he did at last, and, forgetting even to pay the man, he rushed into the flat and into that blessed little room in which he had spent such happy hours while she sat on the fender stool and looked up at him. She was waiting for him—watching. She flung herself into his arms.



Drawn by P. J. Howat.

"What is the meaning of this?" he asked sternly.—Page 264.

"Oh, darling, darling Guy," she said, "what are we to do? He has come back!"

"Come back?"

"He isn't dead," she moaned.

He pushed her a little way off and looked at her. "What do you mean?" Of course he knew, but he wanted it put into words.

"He is alive—alive— The telegram saying he was dead was all a mistake; he has been in prison."

Her face was flushed and her eyes shining; there were tears on her cheeks. He felt paralyzed.

"Why didn't he telegraph? When did he come?"

"Last night, just about half past nine. He didn't know we thought he was dead, he meant it to be a happy surprise." She wrung her hands. "He came about half past nine, and mother went away with aunt."

"Did he stay here all night?"

She covered her face with her hands. "Yes, he stayed here all night—I cried my life out—I thought I should die."

"Where is he now?"

"He went by the ten o'clock train to see his mother. He wanted me to go but I wouldn't. I telegraphed to you the minute he had gone. Oh, Guy, Guy, what shall I do?"

"It's too awful—for me."

"And for me, too."

"But, my dear child, you loved him?" He felt sorry for the poor beggar.

"Oh, yes, I did once, but not now. I love you—you."

A sense of justice laid hold of him though he was miserable. "You must think of him." He stood a little way off. She was another man's wife.

"I shall never be able to bear it," she said recklessly, "and we shall live in this horrid little flat again and I shall be a nobody to the end of my days."

His heart went cold. "You'll get used to it. It's no good. We must say good-by, my dear."

"Oh, I can't—I can't——"

"Poor chap, probably he had a bad time. You must make him as happy as you can—I'd better go."

"Oh, but you mustn't—mustn't go," she said, and clung to him. "And I've

thought of a way out. Take me away. Take me away at once——"

He was touched, of course—after all, he was only a man. "I can't do that," he said, but he brushed back her rumpled hair and his arms went around her.

"You can," she said. "Take me at once, this very minute. There's your taxi at the door. Let us go now—I'll leave a note——"

"My dear child, you don't know what you're asking."

"Yes, I do, I've thought it out. I lay awake all night planning it."

"Good God! All night!"

"Take me away this minute," she entreated.

"I can't," he said—slowly.

"But you can. He'd get a divorce directly. He's that sort of man. And then we could be married. It is so easy to get a divorce now. Take me, Guy, darling."

"I'm not going to do it," he said firmly, and pushed her gently from him. "It's an awful business. But I'm sorry for this chap and I'm not going to behave like a—like a skunk."

"Oh, but I love you so—I love you so."

He took her in his arms again at that. "My little girl, my little girl," he said, "one must do the right thing——"

Then the door opened and a man entered. They started apart and stood like two scared hares. He was a thin man, tall, lantern-jawed, with stern blue eyes and very fair hair. His coat-sleeves were too short; and he closed his large hands as if he were doubling his fists.

"Oh, Leonard! Leonard!" she gasped.

"What is the meaning of this?" he asked sternly.

"I thought you had gone to Reading. I didn't dream you would come back." She trembled with fright.

"I lost my train." He turned to Guy then. "Perhaps you will be good enough to explain, sir?"

She went to the sofa and hid her face in a cushion.

"My wife always had her flirtations." He looked unforgivingly at the little figure on the sofa. "No doubt she has had them even in the past months; but I didn't expect to find her in another man's arms this morning, after the ef-

fusive welcome she gave me last night. I can believe anything after this. You had better take her away at once. I presume that is your taxi at the door. She can go."

She raised her head at that and showed a tear-stained face. Her lips were trembling; she held out her hands. "Oh, yes, take me away, Guy, take me away."

A sound broke from her husband's lips.

Then Guy spoke, and there was something that carried conviction in every word he spoke. "Look here," he said, "I'm going to tell you the literal facts and she knows the truth of them. You and I have both been out in this war and within easy reach of death and I should deserve to be shot if I lied to you. Your wife is very young and pretty, and she loved you right enough at one time—I know that. She thought you were dead—thought it for a year. You couldn't expect her to spend the rest of her days alone, struggling and giving singing lessons, living with a delicate mother and a deaf aunt in the Regent's Park. She's four and twenty. I came along and fell in love with her—you did; so you can find an excuse for me. I offered to marry her, only yesterday, though I have been in love with her much longer. I was awfully sorry for her, that's how it began. I felt that she wanted a proper home of her own again, and comfort and luxury, that's why she took me. I think it was natural enough—and that you ought to forgive her. It wouldn't be fair to any woman, at her age, to expect her to spend a life of grieving and struggling if she could help it. I shouldn't expect a woman to do it for me."

"She was in your arms when I came in."

"I know she was—my fault. I was awfully fond of her. I couldn't let her go without just—well—just a minute. It was my fault—not hers. She had waited a year—lots of women haven't done that—she only left off her mourning the other day. She looked like a little funeral six weeks ago. It was awful. Now I've told you the truth. You can believe it or not, just as you choose."

"I do," the other man answered doggedly. "And I think she would have

made a better thing of it if I had not turned up and you had married her." He looked at her. She was sitting up on the sofa. His expression softened. "If I could believe she loved me."

"But I do, Leonard, of course I do," she said in the pathetic tone Guy knew so well. "Only—only he has been so kind—and so kind to mother, too." It was very adroit of her to put that in, Guy thought afterward. "But of course I love you, Leonard— And, oh, do forgive me." She looked at Guy, tearful and imploring.

"Of course I forgive you," Guy answered; "so will he. I am going." He turned to Thornton. "I would have done my best to take care of her and you will have her—a ripping little woman—all your life—but if I'd dreamt—"

Thornton hesitated a moment, then gripped the extended hand. "I think you are a good fellow," he said. "I don't know who you are or what your name is, on the whole I'd rather not, for we had better keep out of each other's way in the future. This is a painful business for us both."

Guy nodded and turned to Esme. "Good-by, my dear," he said; "I shan't forget you and it will all turn out much better for you than if you had gone on with a duffer like myself. I can feel that he's a cleverer fellow than I am and a better one."

She held out her hand shyly. He kissed it and went to the door. Leonard saw him out and waited till the taxi had disappeared. Then he went back to Esme.

"Oh, Lennie, darling," she said, "you do forgive me, don't you, darling? I thought you had gone forever and I couldn't bear being poor. And he was so rich and kind and mother wanted it and it seemed the only thing to do."

"Yes, my dear, I understand, of course you had to think of her—and he was such a good fellow that I'm rather ashamed of myself for turning up."

Guy sat by his fire again that night and thought it over. "Poor little girl," he said to himself. "But she was a cute little beggar—and on the whole I think I'm well out of it."